

### "Old Slow Town": Detroit During the Civil War

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## Review

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**Taylor, Paul** *"Old Slow Town": Detroit During The Civil War*. Wayne State University Press, ISBN 9780814336038

### Dissent, Opportunity, and Transformation in Civil War Detroit

Over the past quarter-century, Civil War historians have turned away from simply focusing on the fighting on the battlefield and politics and strategy in Washington, Richmond, and various state capitals, giving substantial attention to the home front in specific locales in both the Union and the Confederacy. Examining the North, works like *Mastering Wartime* (1990) by Matthew Gallman, on Philadelphia, and *Civil War Boston* (1997) by Thomas O'Connor explored the impact of the conflict on specific major cities; others, such as *Fire Within* (1995) by Kerry Trask, observed the struggle from the vantage point of smaller towns like Manitowoc, Wisconsin. This turn brought Civil War historians into the field of social history in a significant way. Most of these studies surveyed divisions on the home front through the lens of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. In "*Old Slow Town*," the first serious study of Civil War Detroit, Paul Taylor uses these divisions – as well as religious and political rifts – as his focus and his starting point, looking beyond them to investigate real and perceived Confederate threats to the city and offering a starting point for the study of local Civil War remembrance.

In this well-written and wide-ranging study, Taylor demonstrates how longstanding, as well as newly-emerging, sites of conflict in Civil War Detroit impacted the lives of its residents and threatened to heat the city to the boiling point. In striving to shape public opinion on the war, Detroit's newspapers, including the hyper-racist *Free Press*, often added fuel to the fire. The first six chapters explore these divisions and their impact. The opening chapter sets the stage, tracing the population and commercial growth of the city from the War of 1812 to the eve of disunion. It recounts the Detroit's development from a frontier outpost to a rising manufacturing center of more than 45,000 residents in 1860.

Rapid population growth in the 1840s and 1850s, largely due an influx of free blacks and former slaves from the South and Irish and German Catholics from Europe, created the tinder for conflict. It also made Detroit very different from its hinterland. Taylor calls Civil War Detroit “a Democratic island surrounded by a sea of Michigan Republicanism” (p. 2). The main reason was immigration and the racial, ethnic, and religious division that it created. Nearly half the city’s residents were immigrants by the beginning of the war. At first, residents even fragmented on support for the war as it neared. Wilbur Storey, the outspoken editor of the *Free Press* threatened that, if federal troops marched against the South, “a fire in the rear will be opened upon such troops” (p. 41). The surrender of Fort Sumter, the rush to enlist, and the city’s role as a recruiting and training center for Michigan troops caused that anti-war spirit to dissipate for a time but it would return by late 1862, generally driven by the same racial, ethnic, class, and religious divisions. Chapter 2 considers those early months of the conflict.

Chapters 3 and 4 recount the reemerging divisions over the war in Detroit during 1862 and 1863. The announcement of the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in late 1862, followed by a military draft and the enlistment of black troops the following year, sparked renewed resistance to the war and vocal Copperhead opposition in the city. When Henry Barns, the British-born editor of the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune* took the lead in publicizing and leading recruitment efforts for the First Michigan Colored Infantry (later the 102nd U.S. Colored Troops), a newspaper war ensued, heightening the notion among Irish and German immigrants that they were being asked to support a war for black folks. The 1863 announcement of a federal draft and its enforcement brought further anti-war activity and threats of roving mobs. Concerned citizens created a 100-man guard to keep order; this was the precursor to Detroit’s modern police force. Tensions boiled over in March 1863, when a black tavern keeper named William Faulkner was arrested for allegedly raping two nine-year-old girls. Although the charges later proved to be untrue, the timing of this arrest with the draft, combined with efforts by the *Free Press* to stoke conflict (referring to Faulkner as a “black fiend”), led to rioting. Marauding mobs attacked African American residents and burned homes and neighborhoods. Many blacks, fearing for their lives, fled across the Detroit River to Canada. Only nightfall and the presence of troops quelled the conflagration. Rumors of rioting continued through the year.

Chapters 5 and 6 look at the impact of the war on women in the city. Because so many men had enlisted or been drafted, many women (even those in

the middle class) chose to enter the workforce. Low wages, wartime inflation, the absence of male breadwinners, and various social problems exacerbated by the war and the presence of so many troops in the city at training centers manifested themselves in a host of ways. Both male and female workers organized in unprecedented fashion. There were several wartime strikes. Taylor uses the case of local needlewomen, whose labor was needed because of the rising demand for uniforms and other clothing items for the war effort, to demonstrate the impact of the war on working women. He also discusses how the war provoked a significant increase in illicit behavior in the city, including prostitution, which ensnared many females who serviced the troops being trained there. Other women, particularly those in the middle and upper classes, sought to contribute to the war effort in other ways. As military hospitals opened in the city, some became nurses, providing care to returning wounded soldiers. Others solicited food, clothing, and supplies for soldiers far from home as part of various Ladies' Aid Societies, many of which eventually became branches of the U.S. Sanitary Commission. Through churches, women also found ways to provide assistance to those widowed or orphaned by the war and to meet the spiritual needs of soldiers in the field.

The Confederate desire to bring the war home to the North is the subject of Chapter 7, which represents a substantial difference between "*Old Slow Town*" and other studies of the local Civil War home front. Taylor discovers a series of clandestine missions (most emanating from Canada) devised by Confederate sympathizers to terrorize Detroit or to liberate prisoner-of-war camps and wreak havoc on shipping and other coastal towns on the nearby Great Lakes. Of course, many rumors of such Confederate efforts abounded in Detroit throughout the war. In September 1864, however, Confederate sympathizers operating out of Canada posed as passengers and commandeered a privately-owned steamer, the *Philo Parsons*, operating in the Detroit River. They steamed out into Lake Erie and used the vessel to board and seize a passenger ferry, which they scuttled. The goal was to liberate Confederate prisoners from Johnson's Island near the southern shore of Lake Erie, then harass lakefront cities such as Buffalo, Cleveland, and Detroit. Upon seeing a Union vessel defending the island, some of the sympathizers mutinied and forced the vessel back to Detroit River, where it was also scuttled and abandoned on the Canadian side. Even this failure heightened fears and fueled greater division among social groups in the city. It eventually prompted the state to enlist a new regiment that acted as a permanently-stationed home guard in Detroit.

Chapter 8 shows Detroit at the war's end, as the troops returned home and the local population – exhausted but changed by the conflict – began to adjust to the city's transformation into a manufacturing center with a very diverse population. The most intriguing element in this brief chapter, however, is the description of the 1872 dedication of the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument at Campus Martius in the heart of the city, which provides a starting point for investigating Civil War remembrance in Detroit. Taylor only begins to link the social history of the war in the city to its social memory but his description of this episode points in an important direction.

Taylor's "*Old Slow Town*" (named for a derisive comment about Detroit at the beginning of the war) is a thoughtful, well-researched, and accessible study. It is replete with carefully-chosen historical quotations and includes numerous vignettes illustrative of the volume's themes. Interesting photographs of Detroit individuals and scenes of the era are scattered through the text. A period street map of Civil War Detroit is reproduced inside the front and back covers. Scholars or other interested parties wishing to go further will find Taylor's extensive bibliography to be an essential first stop. A very helpful index rounds out the volume. Readers will find that, in spite of the title, this book is anything but slow reading.

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